

UK pilots' union BALPA shuts down strikes at two airlines

Our reporter
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The British Airline Pilots Association (BALPA) has called off two major strikes by pilots in the UK.

Last week, the union cancelled a strike by 4,000 British Airways (BA) pilots that was due to take place today. The pilots held a powerful 48-hour strike on September 9 and 10 in their first-ever stoppage.

Just days later, BALPA called off a series of planned strikes by pilots at the budget airline Ryanair.

Reflecting the enormous objective strength of airline workers, the BA strike had a major impact internationally. It led to the cancellation of 1,700 flights, affecting 300,000 passengers. It was estimated to have cost BA £80 million to £100 million over the two days.

The pilots voted to strike after rejecting a company pay offer of just 11.5 percent over three years, after having endured—thanks to the collaboration of the union bureaucracy with management—years of below-inflation pay rises and attacks on pensions which saved BA around £800 million.

From the beginning, BALPA worked to strangle the struggle of the pilots and prevent a unified offensive by pilots across the industry with other airline staff.

In BALPA's September 18 press release, General Secretary Brian Strutton said: "Someone has to take the initiative to sort out this dispute and with no sign of that from BA, the pilots have decided to take the responsible course. In a genuine attempt at establishing a time out for common sense to prevail, we have lifted the threat of the strike... BA passengers rightly expect BA and its pilots to resolve their issues without disruption and now is the time for cool heads and pragmatism to be brought to bear. I hope BA and its owner IAG show as much responsibility as the pilots."

The press release could have been written by BA's PR department, as the union declared, "It was now time for a period of reflection before the dispute escalates further and irreparable damage is done to the brand."

It added, "BALPA hopes BA will now change its approach and negotiate seriously with a view to ending this dispute."

Workers should be clear on Strutton's dissembling. It wasn't "the pilots" that "decided to take the responsible course" to call off the walkout—it was the BALPA leadership. Speaking to the *Financial Times*, Strutton insisted that in any talks BALPA was willing to "move our position", i.e., sell out the demands of pilots.

Hoping to retain a shred of credibility, BALPA tacked onto the end of its statement that it could, under the terms of July's strike ballot, take further action up until January 2020.

In the other dispute halted by BALPA, UK-based pilots employed by Irish-headquartered Ryanair had already struck over several days after voting by an 80 percent majority for industrial action. Their grievances included pension rights, maternity benefits, loss of licence insurance and pay structure. The pilots walked out for two days in August, three in early September with a 48-hour stoppage taking place over two days of strikes beginning September 18.

The union called off the upcoming Ryanair strikes under conditions in which the company is stepping up its offensive against pilots.

A BALPA press release issued September 19 and headlined, "Ryanair reverts to type..." stated, "UK Ryanair pilots have been told by the airline that benefits will be removed should they take part in current strike action, which started yesterday." It continued, "Ryanair continues to refuse ACAS [government conciliation service] talks and appears to have no interest in bringing the dispute to a conclusion."

The only ones set on bringing the struggle to a conclusion were BALPA. Revealing their pro-capitalist agenda BALPA issued a statement September 18 appealing to Ryanair shareholders to intervene at the Ryanair AGM taking place the next day—as a vital means to bring the dispute to a close. Its main argument was that Ryanair's actions could jeopardise the future smooth running of the airline.

It continued, "Ryanair is already under pressure from US-based investors who have accused the airline of making 'false and misleading statements' about relations with

workers and unions that they claim artificially inflated the carrier's share price... investors argue that Ryanair failed to reveal in company statements and discussions with industry analysts that labour relations were deteriorating in 2017 and that the airline was unable to hire or keep enough pilots to meet expected demand in the face of strikes, thus increasing the risk of cancellations; and that it needed to increase pay and benefits significantly in order to recruit and retain staff."

Detailing what that led to the UK strike, BALPA said, "Underlying the dispute over pay and conditions is pilot anger and resentment over a range of harsh cost-saving measures used by Ryanair. Many pilots begin their Ryanair careers on very insecure, zero-hours type contracts—you're only paid if you fly, with no paid holiday, sick pay or maternity pay... Ryanair also fails to highlight how it also expects pilots to pay for their own uniform, food and drinks on board aircraft, parking at work, medicals, and much more—something quite unique to Ryanair."

It concluded with the plea: "BALPA hopes that Ryanair's shareholders recognise and challenge the abysmal state of industrial and employee relations within their airline and the see [sic] the reputational damage this will lead to if the strike action is allowed to go on indefinitely."

A further five days of strike action by UK Ryanair pilots were planned beginning September 21 with a final strike on September 29. On September 20, BALPA announced it was suspending these.

In a press release, "Ryanair pilots take the moral highground," it said the strikes were off "even though the relationship between Ryanair and its pilots in the UK and elsewhere remain acrimonious..."

It declared, "Instead of engaging in negotiations Ryanair has reverted to type, electing to punish pilots by withdrawing their travel benefits."

Instead of opposing these attacks, "UK pilot representatives consulted striking members yesterday and agreed to suspend any further strikes in order to pave the way for meaningful negotiations under the auspices of the UK conciliation service, ACAS."

There was no information published as to what the so-called consultation with the strikers consisted of. BALPA informed Ryanair that "Despite a strong turnout for strike action and a high level of commitment among pilots in Ryanair," their "representatives took the decision to allow a breathing space in the hope that constructive negotiations could get underway."

Exactly whose side the trade union bureaucracy are on can be understood from their boast that taking the "moral highground" means ending strikes!

While Ryanair workers are seeking decent pay and working conditions, the Ryanair AGM took no one "to task"

and voted in favour of the proposed remuneration report.

Reuters reported September 19 that, "Chief Executive Michael O'Leary narrowly secured approval from shareholders on Thursday for a bonus scheme that could earn him 100 million euros over five years as he revealed up to 700 pilots could lose their jobs... To earn his 100 million euro bonus, O'Leary would need to reverse a near-50 percent fall in the company's share price since 2017."

Reuters noted that O'Leary will be granted "10 million share options if he doubles Ryanair's profitability to 2 billion euros per annum and/or increase the share price to 21 euros per share."

Reversing the share price upwards means posting increased profits that ultimately can only come by lowering costs. With the task ahead clear, O'Leary said, "I think most shareholders would take the view that if he doubles the share price, we don't care what you pay him for the next five years."

O'Leary is wasting no time, as he warned, "We are looking at voluntary [redundancies], but ultimately we will move from voluntary to compulsory very quickly," with Reuters reporting that he said, "pilots had already been offered 12-month unpaid leave."

BALPA estimated that it would have cost BA only around £5 million to give pilots what they wanted. But instead, BA was willing to lose far more in two days of strikes as it steels itself to impose its dictates on its employees in the period ahead. This is the attitude being taken by airlines internationally as they move to increase their profits in order to survive in one of the most dog-eat-dog industries.

Pilots cannot look to BALPA or any union to defend their interests. They must turn to the building of democratic rank-and-file groups, independent from the unions. These must reach out to pilots and other workers at BA, Ryanair and other airlines across Europe and internationally who face the same attacks on their conditions and jobs.

The author recommends:

Two-day strike by 4,000 British Airways pilots concludes [12 September 2019]

Unions step up sabotage of airline workers' struggles in Europe [3 August 2019]



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